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Designing food packaging to present healthy and ethical diets to the New Chinese middle classes

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ABSTRACT

'Healthy' and 'ethical' food is one of the fastest-growing food trends around the world. Yet scholars in this journal have shown that what this means in many territories tends to be dominated by Western-centric concepts. They call for the need to decenter the dominant Euro-American and Anglo-centric food scholarship in order to throw light on these processes. To better understand food globalization, one must consider how regional history, culture, economics, and politics foster a complex dynamic of global-local and West-East flows. Aligning with these concerns, we analyze food packages from China marketed at a rapidly growing health and ethical food market. Using an in-depth qualitative method, Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, we examine the discursive and material power of healthy and ethical food products as these are communicated through packaging designs, showing how these carry ideas, value, and identities. We explore how this might be understood in the context of where such designs target an emerging Chinese middle class, concerned about food integrity, but also who seek out distinction and modern cosmopolitanism. We ask how the ideas carried by the packages might shape and steer local understandings of healthy and ethical food.

KEYWORDS

Food globalization; food packaging; Chinese middle class; multimodality; social semiotics

Introduction

It has been argued that food has shaped human society, having a great impact on human health, culture diversity, economy, and politics (De St. Maurice 2013; Pilcher 2017). And given the global industry in food production, food trades, food products, and styles, it has been argued that food is to be understood through the lens of globalization and also that globalization is itself to be understood through the lens of food (Phillips 2006). The central importance of this matter for food studies was signaled in a special edition of this journal called "Transecting 'healthy' and 'sustainable' food in the Asia Pacific" (Montefrio and Wilk 2020). The special urged for more work to shift the Euro-American dominance of food scholarship. Of particular relevance for our present study was its interest in how notions of healthy and ethical foods have become increasingly globalized, where complex of flows between global-local, West-East, regional history,

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culture, economic, and politics, have contributed to creating unique local accents in what constitute the idea of healthy or ethical foods (Montefrio et al. 2020; Chera 2020; Ho 2020).

In this paper, we use a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analytical Approach (MCDA) (Ledin and Machin 2018) to look at a sample from a corpus of healthy and ethical food packaging collected in China, which comprises the world's largest growing market for these kinds of branded products (IFOAM 2009; Zhou 2008). We are interested not so much in what is 'healthy' or 'ethical,' per se, but in how these ideas are communicated in a range of buzzwords, along with the iconographies and packaging styles, found typically, for example in Europe, the US, and Australia and now more commonly in China. While healthy and ethical food are parallel concepts, marketing very often merges the two. Those positioned as having some kind of health benefit often also combine ethical consumption ideas, such as 'natural,' 'organic,' 'sustainable,' 'local,' or 'recyclable' (Eriksson and Machin 2020). This merging and blurring is of interest to us in this paper.

It has been observed that in Western societies food marketing has colonized, shaped and distorted understandings of healthy and ethical eating, even distracting from the nature of these things (Johnston and Baumann 2010; Eriksson and Machin 2020). But what is the case in China? Following Montefrio and Wilk (2020), we critically examine the discursive and material power of these healthy and ethical food products. In other words, how do these shape and steer how consumers may come to understand these issues? How are the buzzwords and iconography of this Western food marketing become deployed on products in China, but in ways that have local inflections. The methodology we use is a form of semiotics, which has been shown to be highly useful for this kind of closer analysis, allowing us to look in detail at how food marketers can load their products with ideas and values which speak to their market.

The attention to such interactions of notions based on complex configurations of culture, economics, and politics in the global context, has been identified as a neglected area of research in food studies (Montefrio and Wilk 2020). In this paper, we seek to contribute to this project in the case of China.

MCDA is a form of communications research. Communications scholars have sought to document how Western media and products impact local cultures (Lechner and Boli 2005; Dreher, Gaston, and Martens 2008), bringing new formats and styles as well as identities, ideas, and values. It has also been argued that globalization and localization exist embedded in all kinds of media and consumer culture around the planet (Aiello and Pauwels 2014). But here communication must be thought of not just in terms of texts, photographs, images, and video, but in the broader strategies deployed by global branding and localization. This could include attention to the design of coffee shops in the fashion of Starbucks' through choices of furnishings (Aiello and Dickinson 2014) or to how typeface, color, and layout are progressively more systematically harnessed in media design (Chen and Machin 2014) all leading to a cross-national visual familiarity, yet with local accents (Pristed Nelson and Faber 2014). For Aiello and Pauwels (2014) it was through attention to such details that we can provide a clearer empirically based understanding of communication taking place in concrete localized situations, rather than leaning on theoretical notions of 'globalization and localization' or 'culture-scapes' (Aiello and Pauwels 2014). In this paper MCDA allows us to take the step of looking closely at foods presented as 'healthy and ethical' in China to consider how marketers

harness aspects of language and design to load their products with ideas and values. In so doing, ultimately following Montefrio and Wilk (2020), we ask what power do the discourses they communicate have to shape the landscape of what healthy and ethical eating mean.

Marketing healthy and ethical food in Western societies

In Western societies there has been a growing focus on health, promoted in part by governments concerned with the economic costs of diet-related illnesses (Patterson and Johnston 2012). There has been corresponding increasing interest in eating healthily by the public, met by widely expanding products available in stores and restaurants (Olayanju 2019). Healthy and ethical food is one of the biggest global growth areas in food sales (Olayanju 2019; Montefrio and Wilk 2020), and in China, the focus of this paper, represents the highest dollar growth in food sales (IFOAM 2009; Zhou 2008).

Nutritional research shows that beyond eating a balanced diet and avoiding processed foods it is not possible to define specific ingredients and proportions of food items nor ingredients to eat healthily (De Ridder et al. 2017). The disagreements and uncertainties within nutrition research however 'tend to be conceded from, or misrepresented to, the lay public' (Scrinis 2013, 6). It is also known that ideas of healthy food can differ greatly across socio-economic groups (Johnston and Baumann 2010) and across different countries (Ferguson 2010). Current nutrition research, what the public, dietary advice, policy and food marketing refer their nutritional knowledge to, however, tends to be decontextualized and simplified, and therefore undermines other ways of knowing and engaging with food that reflect these differences (Scrinis 2013).

Food marketing has developed a range of products that carry an array of buzzwords to signify "healthiness," including "low fat," "low carb," "healthy grains," "organic," "energy boosting," "source of protein," "superfoods," "raw," "plant based," "low calorie," "lactose free," etc. These buzzwords can be highly contradictory and confusing for consumers (O'Neill and Silver 2017) and tend to be combined in different ways to form what has been called a "hodgepodge" of healthy associations where there is no logic to the combinations and no clear sense of what each actually does (Lewis 2008). In fact, research in nutrition studies shows that these buzzwords can be misleading in regard to the actual nutritional content of the product. For example, a product labeled as "no added sugar" can have high actual sugar content through added fruit concentrates (Siipi 2012). A product labeled "high protein" can contain high amounts of trans fat and sugar (Chen and Eriksson 2019). The buzzwords "multi-grains," "high fiber" and "roughage" are promoted by the agri-food industry as beneficial, yet nutritionists show that there is no evidence for this (Polan 2008; Monastyrsky 2005). Such terms can create a "halo effect" (Fernan, Schuldt, and Niederdeppe 2017), which leads consumers to mistakenly assume that they are buying something healthy (Iles, Nan, and Verrill 2017). Such use of buzzwords reflect what Scrinis (2013) calls 'nutritionism' and 'nutritional reductionism,' a reductive focus on the nutrient composition of food as the means for understanding the complexity of food to bodily health. This has serves as a powerful frameworks for transforming nutrients and nutritional knowledge into marketable food products and commodify food production and consumption (ibid).

The idea of healthy food also merges and fuses with notions of ethical eating, where we find buzzwords like: "sustainable," "hand-made," "Fairtrade," "organic," "local" (Johnston and Baumann 2010), also often forming part of the overall hodgepodge of qualities of foods carrying healthy buzzwords (Eriksson and Machin 2020). Yet such products often gloss over the complexities of things like food sourcing, transportation, manufacture, packaging processes, marketing, global trade structures, and waste disposal (Eriksson and Machin 2020). Shugart (2014) argues that ethical buzzwords must, in part, be understood through how they address middle-class consumers who seek tasteful alternatives to anonymous corporate culture and mass production, related to ideas of "slowness," "wholeness" and "authenticity."

These products can also bring a sense of morality (Low, Davenport, and Carrigan 2005). They allow consumers to act in relation to their concerns for environmental and social injustices through what has been termed "political consumerism" – something available to those with spending power (Banet-Weisser 2012). One concern here is that marketing may ultimately colonize and shape our sense of health and acting ethically, simplifying complex issues, presenting market-friendly 'solutions' packaged in attractive ways (Forsyth and Young 2007, 29). Such packages make saving your body or the planet seem simple, chic, and tasteful (Ledin and Machin 2020a). Scholars have shown, the importance for food studies to learn more about how notions of commodified ethical food and political consumerism in Pacific Asia (Khalikova 2020; Lin 2020; Montefrio et al. 2020). Given such concerns, it is of interest to consider how such branded products take form in China.

Healthy and ethical food consumption in China

Economic and social reforms within China since the 1980s have resulted in significant changes in the food industry, food culture, and food consumption patterns (Riccioli et al. 2020; Veeck and Veeck 2000). This includes the increasing presence of international retail chains and availability of formerly scarce imported products such as processed, frozen, pre-prepared foods and dairy items, and has led to increases in fats, sugars, and grains in diets. It has been shown that the demand for Western-style and imported foods has mainly been by the newly emerged urban middle class who have the spending power (Grunert et al. 2011). This fits patterns observed for the Pacific Asia region in general where such consumption is a more elite activity (Khalikova 2020; Lin 2020; Montefrio et al. 2020).

Although not a monolithic group, scholars identify a number of typical patterns characterizing the Chinese middle class. They seek good education for their children, property investment, but also status and cultural capital, often realized in consumption (Guo 2017; Goodman 2013). This consumption culture has been linked to values of aspiration, empowerment, having "good taste," and, importantly, being modern and cosmopolitan (Mao 2018; Goodman 2013). What is perceived as Western-style, and imported, products, such as clothing, cars, furniture, popular and high culture, as well as food, are part of this, bringing new possibilities for the expression of personal desires, moral autonomy, and leisure (Guo 2017; Xu 2007). It has been argued that these combine with broader Western ideas and values relating to individualism and a more self-centered morality (Yan 2009). These depart from more traditional local notions of social

responsibility, knowing one's position and restraint, which have a character rooted in Confucianism, Taoism, Maoism, and more recent interactions with international cultures (Lu 1998; Elfick 2011). Such ideas and values having been steered by more recent local political initiatives as part of stimulating the economy of which the new middle class are themselves a result (Zhang 2020; Tomba 2014; Goodman 2013).

The demand for imported products also relates to a series of high-profile food safety scares involving misleading labeling along with growing awareness of pollution (Riccioli et al. 2020; Tong et al. 2020). This has led to a surge in organic/green/eco/ethical food consumption among those who can afford high prices (Chen and Lobo 2012). The "Lifestyle of Health and Sustainability" (LOHAS) trend has been growing in popularity among middle-class consumers (Chen and Lobo 2012). The Chinese organic food market has grown faster than the world average (IFOAM 2009) and in 2008, China was the fourth largest organic market in the world (Zhou 2008).

This turn to eco foods and concern about polluted land has also been related to broader shifting attitudes to nature and the countryside. In the mid-2000s, rural areas were associated with "poverty, ignorance, insanitation, underdevelopment, backwardness, barbarism [and] stupidity" (Su 2010, 1439). But this is changing to where the middle classes engage in hiking, visiting rural areas, and take day trips to experience the flourishing organic farms appearing around the main cities (Brunner 2019). These farms and other rural tourism sites provide a romanticized and idealized version of countryside life (Martin, Lewis, and Sinclair 2013; Zou 2005).

The analysis, which follows allows us to begin to throw some light on how food companies exploit these historical shifts, using packaging designs to sell ideas of healthy and ethical food. It is here that we can think about what Montefrio and Wilk (2020) call the discursive power embedded in these material objects. We can also think about what Halawa and Parasecoli (2021) describe as an intense of designing and codification of foodscape, which allows the same shared repository elements to be assembled in very different combinations to create globally repeating forms of urban locality.While we may in part see such designs as being a way that market needs are met, we can, from a communications research perspective also ask what set of ideas they carry, naturalize, and legitimize, about how we take care of ourselves and the planet (Eriksson and Machin 2020) as well broader social and political issues (Montefrio and Wilk 2020).

Theory and methods

The analysis draws on tools and concepts from Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) (Machin and Mayr 2012; Ledin and Machin 2018) and Social Semiotics (Van Leeuwen 2005; Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006). MCDA is aligned with the field of critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA is a form of qualitative critical linguistic analysis interested in how language can shape how events, processes, and persons are represented in ways that serve particular ideological aims (Fairclough 1992). The assumption is that language use is never neutral but loaded with specific ideological interests. Language is seen as a repertoire of possible choices, each of which has the "meaning potential" (Halliday 1978) to be deployed, to communicate specific kinds of meanings. The analysis looks carefully at these choices. For example, we may ask what kind of identity category is chosen from a range of possible choices to describe a person: their nationality, ethnicity,

occupation, parental status, bodily shape, gender, etc. In CDA, these are thought of as choices, which direct how a person is represented and evaluated. Ultimately, CDA is interested in the role of language in the functioning of social and political life, (Flowerdew and Richardson 2017). Language choices communicate broader discourses (Foucault 1972) which lay out and evaluate how we understand processes, causalities, how we plan and organize.

In MCDA, it has been shown that it is possible to carry out this kind of close critical analysis not just of language, but all forms of choices in communication, which may combine language, images, sounds, textures, video, etc, (Machin and Mayr 2012). In MCDA, we also approach choices in design in terms of their meaning potentials and how they come to shape representations of things, persons, and processes (Ledin and Machin 2018). We can attend to choices in the weight or height of fonts, the saturation or dilution of colors, the roughness or smoothness of surfaces, the roundness or angularity of forms. In MCDA scholars have presented inventories of choices (Van Leeuwen 2005; Kress 2010; Ledin and Machin 2020b). These have already been productively used to carry out critical analyses of packing (Wagner 2015; Chen and Eriksson 2019; Ledin and Machin 2020a; Machin and Cobley 2020; Andersson 2020). Importantly, such choices, which compose the material forms of packaging have significant discursive power as they form material objects, which become incorporated into everyday lives, found in our shops, kitchens, or sat on our office desk.

Practically MCDA presents a closer analysis of a smaller number of examples, usually taken from a larger corpus (Machin and Mayr 2012). Its value lies in the closer detail and thoroughness of analysis. In this case, our sample of 100 food products was collected following Pink's visual ethnography (Pink 2013). We purchased items that we had seen consumed by professional, higher income, people who would fit the socioeconomic classification for the new middle classes (Goodman 2013; Mao 2018). These were bought in stores in 3 major cities: Shanghai, Beijing, and Hangzhou. The products included snacks, dairy, protein supplements, bread, cereals, and drinks.

The analysis is comprised of two steps. The first stage was carried out using Van Dijk's (2009) semantic macro-analysis to look for the main themes in the data. We used open coding and axial coding to look for major categories and to understand the relationships between the subcategories (Charmaz 2006). In this paper, we present four of these themes. 1. The presence of buzzwords and iconography common to health and ethical foods in many Western societies; 2. A highly romanticized view of nature, which scholars have argued marks a shift in China; 3. There is an almost 'overdetermined' sense of order and regulation in these designs. 4. We find representations of a very specific kind of Chinese middle-class nuclear family. The second stage is what we present below where we carry out the closer analysis to show how these themes are realized on a sample of packages, showing how more local accents blend with those which are more Western.

The iconography of healthy and ethical food

The packages in our corpus carry the buzzwords and iconography found in Western-style healthy and ethical food marketing. These are either newer to the Chinese market or more established things, such as nuts and fruit, presented in newly commodified ways.

What becomes highly relevant, we show in the following sections, is how these are represented and integrated into the designs, which allow the communication of specific ideas, values, and identities.

On the daily nuts package (Figure 1) we find ingredients such as "cranberries," "blueberries," "walnuts," "almonds," etc. These are presented in language, in both Mandarin Chinese and English, the latter helping to communicate "international" and "modern" (Hsu 2008).

On the cereal package (Figure 2) we find reference to other typical Western buzzwords and iconography. On the front, we see "5 grains," ingredients still rarer in China, and introducing the idea of "fiber" and "roughage" as healthy. On the side panel, there is a reference to fruit and nuts, which the consumer can themselves add, bringing connotations that this product aligns with a healthy diet. On the cereal box, we also find the highly ambiguous concept of "nutritious" above the fruit on the side of the cereal box.

Nutritional researchers (cf. Siipi 2012) have observed that this array of buzzwords and buzz ingredients, can be entirely unrelated to actually eat healthily, or acting in ways that address complex environmental or ethical issues (Low, Davenport, and Carrigan 2005). But, of course, these are not just buzzwords and buzz things but represent tools and

Figure 1. Daily nuts package.

Figure 2. Kellog's cereal package.

concepts for managing lives, for dealing with more abstract matters to which they give form and shape – particularly in the codified and commodified form they take in these designs. This is the discursive power that they carry. They lay out ways of acting and being. They present a kind of tick-list for taking care of our bodies and acting in moral ways. Most importantly, as Banet-Weiser (2012) argues, this appears as simple, efficient, easy.

We see other buzzwords and buzz ingredients in other examples. The pea snack (Figure 3) is a typical healthy and ethical style product that can be found in Western stores. Here, ingredients like pulses, wholes grains, and peas have changed from being low-status foods to connoting simplicity, stripped-back, unrefined, and natural par excellence, even when they sit in snacks high in sugar, salt, and fats (Eriksson and Machin 2020). On this package, we find other buzzwords: "14% protein," "7% rich in fiber," "baked not fried," and "0 g Trans fat," the combination of which comprises the kind of "hodgepodge" described by nutritionists.

These products also carry a range of icons and stamps typical of such Western products, which suggest quality, but also, again a sense of "ticking off" health and ethics. At the bottom of the cereal package, we find three circles. These carry icons: a beehive and droplet of honey, a heart icon, and different grains, rendered as simple, easy to grasp, and represent. The hive naturalizes the sugar content of the product. The grain icon idealizes 'grains' as simple. The heart icon symbolizes "health." What such icons mean is never specified.

We begin to see how these products have been loaded with ideas about healthy and ethical diets, which have been highly criticized by nutritionists in Western societies (Eriksson and Machin 2020). There is one aspect of this iconography that deserves specific attention regarding the new forms of representation of nature in China, which we now address.

Figure 3. Pea snack package front.

The romanticization of nature as part of healthy and ethical eating

Visual communication scholars have long observed how marketers in Western markets have used idealized representations of nature to communicate a range of associations to sell food products (Hansen 2002; Dragoescu Urlica 2021; Stano 2021). Mountains can suggest purity and freshness, and cute farmyards connote family-based production (Luetchford 2015). Such representations are central to communicating ideas of authenticity, slowness, wholeness, simplicity (Shugart 2014). And such representations differ across cultures in relation to real or idealized notions of landscape (Andersson 2020). Running through our corpus of packages we find evidence of marketers speaking to, what Chinese scholars have

described, as the middle class' new re-imagining of the natural and nature, shifting from earlier associations with the rural as backward, insular, and low status (Brunner 2019).

We see these idealized representations of nature in the whimsical icons of leaves, the ears of wheat, and the sunrise scene on the front of the cereal package (Figure 2). On the side panel, we find items of fruit and nuts produced in a delicate Chinese water-color style. Here nature is simple, innocent, and tasteful.

The drawing on the back of the pea snack in Figure 4 depicts the stages of the production processes of the product. To the left we see two men, wearing Chinese peasant-style hats, one smiling, labeled as "Meticulously selecting peas." To the right are two women sitting on the ground, labeled "Ground to a fine pea powder after second careful selection," where they handle grapefruit-sized peas. This connotes a non-industrial process. It is personalized. There is an emphasis on care, even stressing "after *second* careful selection." As Polan (2008) points out, in such representations of romanticized production processes, there is a sense of honesty, skill, and pleasure in basic manual labor, providing contrast to the idea of a cynical, corporatized food industry. Absent are the processes involved in the package design and manufacturing, the stages of product development, branding, marketing, transport, and the disposal of multi-layer wrappers.

The form of the representation of this rural scene is important too. This is a highly idealized scene, not simply in terms of how it is depicted, but in terms of how it communicates innocence and artlessness through the use of the drawings in the fashion of a children's storybook. The representation here appears to have a more local accent than the kinds of nature documented in Western food marketing such as in the US, UK, and Sweden (Andersson 2020). Here the cuteness of the characters and of the scene can be placed in the context of Kawaii culture often found in Chinese marketing (Chen and Machin 2014; Iwabuchi 2002), aligning with the representations of the happy pea characters seen on the front of the package (Figure 3). On the package in Figure 9, we see another idealized rural scene, depicting rice fields, taking a style resembling local scenery, and those found in more modern Chinese landscape art. Here eating healthily and communing with nature fuses with both romantic and idealized ideas of nature and labor and with cosmopolitan associations of Japanese pop culture.

What we see here is that symbolic localness is realized through, ethnic peasants, scenery, and art forms, configured in what Stano (2021) found commonly used to communicate organic food: a wild, rustic, ethnic, and local nature. Such combinations can be recognizable as authentic in localized contexts (Halawa and Parasecoli 2021).

Order, rationality, and chic style

It has been argued that ideas and values relating to health (Wagner 2015; Ledin and Machin 2018) and ethics (Machin and Cobley 2020) are coded into such products, not only in words and images but at the level of design in the packages. It is this that helps to give such material objects their discursive power. Work has already been done using these ideas to look at how such choices in food packing can communicate meanings such

Figure 4. Pea snack package back.

as "natural" (Wagner 2015) "national identities" (Andersson 2020), "purity" (O'Hagan 2020), "social justice" (Ledin and Machin 2020a) and "gender" (Bouvier and Chen 2021). We look at textures, fonts, and colors in turn and then consider the nature of the designs they form together.

Textures

The daily nuts (Figure 1), pea snack (Figure 3), and Arla milk (Figure 5) packages have slightly uneven, or roughened, textured. In social semiotics (Djonov and Van Leeuwen 2011; Aiello and Dickinson 2014) it has been argued that such textures can be used to suggest something less polished, less processed, more natural. So,

Figure 5. Arla milk package front.

naturalness can be built into a highly processed product at this level. In other packaging, in our sample, for newly appearing, wheat-based bread products, organic pasta, rice, and flour, and low-fat yogurt, we find this kind of attention to texture, also with the use of rougher brown paper bags, wood, and sacking-type cloth.

Forms

Ledin and Machin (2020b) note how manufacturers have developed new forms of packaging such as the pouches we see in Figures 1, 8 and 9. These can be printed with different textures, but also can communicate something both more tidy and modern. We can compare the daily nuts package to a more traditional transparent peanuts plastic package. Machin and Cobley (2020) have noted that in Western societies, such designs have played an important role in shifting associations of natural, organic, and plant-based products away from more 'Hippie' associations to align with values of urban modern chic – found used for organic and Fairtrade coffee, nuts, cereals, etc. This same meaning appears relevant for the Chinese middle-class consumers seeking these products with these meanings as part of creating distinctions. Practically such designs are important as part of product differentiation where consumers will be paying significantly higher prices for products already available cheaply in stores nearby.

Fonts

Chen and Machin (2014) documented the adoption of Western patterns in graphic design in China from the early 2000s. One observation was the greater attention given to font qualities to communicate product associations and values, specifically in Chinese

characters. We find such use of fonts in this food packaging. On the daily nuts package, we find slim, slightly angular fonts for the ingredients, such as walnuts. On the cereal (Figure 2) and pea snack (Figure 3) packages we see very slender and taller fonts used for the buzzwords, "LOHAS five grain" and the delicate writing used to explain adding fruits, and "baked not fried" and "0 g Trans fat." It has been argued that slimmer, in contrast to heavier and bolder, fonts can metaphorically suggest something lighter, "delicate," "subtle," "healthier" or "low calories," rather than a heavier font, which might suggest "substantial," "filling," "overbearing" (Van Leeuwen 2005). Taller fonts can also be associated with values such as "aspirational" and more angular fonts, as technical and rational (Van Leeuwen 2005). In these examples, there is a sense of such font qualities being used to bring a sense of tidiness, order, and modernity to the Chinese writing, as well as to communicate, lightness, and simplicity. These can be contrasted to products that carry more traditional forms of Chinese characters where there is less attention to such semiotic meaning potentials.

Color

In MCDA, researchers have looked at the meaning potential of color. This is not only about hue, which is known to have important cultural variations, but also qualities such as levels of saturation, brightness, and purity (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2002). It is clear that on the products in our sample we find earthy colors, such as greens and browns and also bright yellows, seen in sunrises, seen on the cereal box, the pea snack, and the landscape in Figure 9. Such meanings appear to travel well from Western culture. It has been observed that in Chinese culture green aligns with the meanings found in Western cultures, relating to nature and growth (Gage 1999). And yellow, while an optimistic color in the West, is associated in China with prosperity.

But it is the color qualities that are particularly important in these designs. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2002) argued that muted colors are associated with more reserved moods, whereas more saturated rich, full, colors relate to more exuberant moods and fun. Such products, in the West, use muted colors to suggest moderate, simple and thoughtful, gentle, attitudes, for example, as compared to children's products, which tend to carry rich saturated colors. We find this idea of health and ethics coded in our sample through this idea of reserved moods. As in the West, healthy and ethical foods can align with a kind of gentle, well-being. But this is also, as Shugart (2014) notes, part of how they signify distance from the busy and anonymous corporate world. And the use of such muted colors has been observed as a traditional feature of Chinese art related to spirituality and more poetical meanings (Zheng 2016).

We also find limited color palettes. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2002) suggest that whereas wide color palettes are associated with energy, liveliness, or garishness, limited palettes suggest restraint, measure, and pensive moods (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2002). On the daily nuts and the pea snack package, we find such limited palettes and pastel colors. These products, as on the pea snack, tend to carry a main color, such as green, but then carry small, tasteful touches of other more exciting colors. On the sea snack, we find red for one of the circles at the bottom; on the cherry held by one of the pea characters;

a blue musical note, associated with long life in Chinese color symbolism (Gage 1999). Again this helps to position such products, with their hodgepodges of buzzwords and expensive packages, as something related to measuring and stillness.

Importantly, across the sample, we find large amounts of white space and empty panels of color. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2002) associate such empty panels, as we see on daily nuts, as about order, cleanliness, rationality, and modernism. We see a striking example in the yogurt package in Figure 8, which also uses slender fonts and a restricted palette. As Chen and Machin (2014) observe in their comparison of graphic design over the past two decades in China, there is a shift away from elements being crowding and competing to greater use of space and order. As Kress and Van Leeuwen (2002) note, such panels can be connected to the meanings of color in modern art, for example, in the work of Mondrian. This, suggests a modern, ordered form of food, uncontaminated. For these Chinese consumers, there are the associations of health simplicity as well as the cultural capital of modernist or abstract art. We see a striking example in the yogurt package in Figure 8, which also uses slender fonts and a restricted palette.

Graphic qualities and classifications

While these products may carry a hodgepodge of health and ethical qualities and meanings such as "urban," "cosmopolitan," "chic," at the same time as "natural," "still," "simple," they nevertheless work as coherent carriers of meaning. Ledin and Machin (2018) have been particularly interested in how such designs create coherence and how language and design features can be used to do so. They have explored the use of size, shape, and color of elements in reference to how this can classify them as being of the same or different order. Elements realized in the same size, or forms, of typeface, can be classified as being of a related order. Hue, or other color qualities, can play the same role.

On the top panel of the daily nuts package, the words for the ingredients are represented in the same slim fonts, symbolizing they are of the same order. Their visual realization, through the simplified sketch style, plays a similar role. This is one way by which buzzwords and buzz ingredients become integrated as coherent wholes, as healthy and ethical products.

On the lower panel of this package, we find a different representation of the ingredients. The seven types of dried fruit and nuts are arranged in a tidy line with equal distances between them. Here, they are all classified as the same through sharing saturated colors and heightened tones, what Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) would call, 'sensory modality' or 'more than real.'

The white of the bottom panel then links with the color of the fonts and sketches in the top panel.

On the one hand, the arrangement of the ingredients and the linking of color between the two panels symbolizes, order, lack of clutter, rationality, as well as design chic. The drive for care, regulation, and order appear salient in communicating natural and healthy to the Chinese consumer. But on the other hand, what is important to take into account in such analysis (Ledin and Machin 2020b) is that the manner by which such things are different or alike is not accounted for clearly and transparently in written text. Rather, it is symbolized. Different types of buzzwords and elements can be represented as of the

same order, connected, or part of the same domain. Positioning in relation to each other and framing can also symbolize types of relationships between elements (Van Leeuwen 2005).

Across our corpus, we find this use of order and integration in designs. On the cereal package, color and style on the side panel link the product, the fruit, milk, and the couple. On the pea snack, the green and white are used in a limited color palette to link the elements together along with a few other colors which rhyme in terms of color quality. On the protein bar (Figure 6 and 7) we find again a restricted color palette, the use of space and order, where the color and fonts create integration.

The use of the stamp and icon features seen at the bottom of the cereal package and the back of the protein bar package is also important for symbolization of order and rational management of health and ethics, even where the actual logic of classifications and links is concealed. In these icons, the forms and style of drawings seen in them: the hive, grains, and heart on the cereal box; the knife and fork and images of people engaged in activities on the protein bar, represent these things as being of the same order, as part of being healthy and ethical lifestyle. On the protein bar, eating processed snacks, working, travel, and fitness are unproblematically placed together as an ordered way of managing a person's life. The links or causality between the elements is not explicit, rather symbolized through the way the form of coding presents them as being of the same order.

Visualizing the new middle classes

Researchers have shown how advertisements display desirable identities, idealized relationships, and life situations (Frith 1997; McCracken 1989). Advertising in China has introduced newer kinds of identities, specifically those more aligned with consumer

Figure 6. Protein bar package front.

Figure 7. Protein bar package back.

individualism and lifestyle (Martin, Lewis, and Sinclair 2013). Across our corpus, we find representations of new types of family structures and what it means to be middle class (Fowler, Gao, and Carlson 2010; Feng, Poston, and Wang 2014).

On the cereal package in Figure 2 we see a couple without children, and not living with parents, having a Western-style breakfast. They have time for each other in an esthetically organized and chic scene. Such representations align with what is seen as more modern ideas of domestic life, shifting away from notions of family ties and responsibility. This involves new kinds of routines, which these products can help to be correctly managed. A healthy diet and the natural are here integrated with these lifestyle shifts.

This modern lifestyle is realized through an art form infused with locality. The scene is represented in the style of Chinese watercolor painting. This typically uses subtle diffused tones with luminosity and transparency, created in part by the kinds of pigments and canvas used. This style is influenced by the techniques of Chinese calligraphy and used to represent more elegant poetical meanings about the human condition and the yin and yang of the universe, drawing on Taoism and Confucianism, found as an influence in modern Chinese art (Zheng 2016).

On the Arla milk carton (Figure 5), we see a family in a park. This is a slightly overexposed photograph suffused with bright light, idealizing the scene with a sense of positivity. Important here is the representation of them outdoors in nature, having fun as a nuclear family. We find no representations of three-generational families in our corpus.

We get more insights into the nature of the new routines and new managed lifestyle through the row of icons found on the back of the protein bar in Figure 7. We find 'breakfast' – symbolized by a knife and fork, not chopsticks, and 'exercise' shown as

Figure 8. Yogurt package.

a gym activity. We also find both 'work' and 'business travel.' The product here is one component of the lifestyle of the modern, successful urban identity. There are no icons for 'caring for family,' 'cleaning the house,' or 'community work.'

The Chinese text on the front of the protein bar package, after "hello bar," reads "you are great" which foregrounds "success" and connects what you eat to a form of self-care, self-management, and fulfillment. This aligns with observations that the Chinese middle classes are increasingly taking on neoliberal forms of identities (Guo 2017; Elfick 2011). These food products carry a sense of managing all parts of life, where the tick lists of buzz ingredients are provided, allowing the consumer to be goal-driven. This also carries the morality of the self-managing, productive citizen.

Figure 9. Organic jujube with walnut package.

Conclusion

The demand for healthy and ethical food is on the rise around the world, especially among the emerging middle class in the Asia Pacific who seek healthier, safer, and more environmental-friendly food options (Montefrio and Wilk 2020). Scholars have shown that, in parts, this is influenced by mass and social media (Tarulevicz 2020; Montefrio et al. 2020). Here, we show this takes place not only through more obvious media forms such as in TVs and advertisements but through the visual more broadly, in the nature of visual design, the forms taken by products, which embed such consumer culture into every life. We also show the value of looking more closely at smaller scale choices in

communication carried by product packaging, through which globalized concepts of healthy and ethical food are infused with local accents, while commodified and embedded in the global neoliberal capitalist system.

Bauman (2007) has argued that consumerism increasingly pushes itself into the spaces where we live, but also those that exist between people. So, we come to know the world, each other, and even our own bodies, through the terms and visual worlds presented to us by marketing. As Eriksson and Machin (2020) observe such definitions of things become built into our everyday material worlds through things like food packaging, the setting up of organic farms, the way gyms define activities, the look of a new vegan restaurant or organic coffee shop. And all these can shape what we do and why we do it.

In the paper, we show that, on the surface, these products reflect that the Chinese middle classes are, like many people around the world, concerned with nutrition and environmental issues. The solutions here are presented as easily graspable, though at the same time, only ever symbolized, remaining abstracted. At a deeper level, food, and food marketers, become agents that shape broader identities of modern Chinese middle class – someone that appreciates nature and peasant labor, embraces individuality, practices self-care and conducts themselves as a productive go-getting citizen. These identities are communicated through chic design that weave symbolic localness into the same Western discourses through, a loosely codified set of buzzwords, iconography, and material objects (Halawa and Parasecoli 2021).

Scrinis (2013) argues that the ideology of nutritionism has shaped the public to see and engage with food as a set of standardized nutritional concepts and categories, which has undermined other ways of seeing and encountering food. In this paper, we have seen, with the global extension of nutritionism, it is not merely how we see and engage with food that has been simplified and standardized, it is also, through food, who we are, and what we do, is placed within a common frame that creates a single scale of "global" value and structure (Wilk 1995, 2006) that reflects homogeneous priorities and values and is communicated through similar design approaches that reap commercial benefits.

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